Demand behavior and empathic accuracy in observed conflict interactions in couples

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Abstract

The study reported in this research note sought to extend the research on motivated empathic accuracy by exploring whether intimate partners who are highly motivated to induce change in their partner during conflicts will be more empathically accurate than partners who are less motivated. In a laboratory experiment, the partners' within 26 cohabiting couples were randomly assigned the role of conflict initiator. The partners provided questionnaire data, participated in a videotaped conflict interaction, and completed a video-review task. More blaming behavior was associated with higher levels of empathic accuracy, irrespective of whether one was the conflict initiator or not. The results also showed a two-way interaction indicating that initiators who applied more pressure on their partners to change were less empathically accurate than initiators who applied less pressure, whereas their partners could counter this pressure when they could accurately "read" the initiator's thoughts and feelings.

Keywords: intimate relationships, empathic accuracy, demand behavior, conflict interactions

Empathic accuracy in couples refers to the extent to which partners understand each other's unspoken thoughts or feelings as they spontaneously occur during the course of their everyday interactions (Ickes, 1993, p. 588). There is considerable evidence that motivation plays an important role in the empathic accuracy of relationship partners. Specifically, relationship partners have been found to be more accurate when they want to enhance perceived closeness (Simpson, Oriña, & Ickes, 2003); provide instrumental support (Verhofstadt, Davis, & Ickes, 2011); solve conflicts (Kilpatrick, Bissonette, & Rusbult, 2002); or bring about more positive long-term outcomes (Thomas & Fletcher, 2003).

There are some cases, however, in which the perceiving partner is motivated to be *less* accurate, particularly when the other partner (i.e., the target) is likely to be harboring thoughts and feelings which, if accurately inferred, would threaten the relationship (Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995; Simpson et al., 2003). It now appears that intimate partners are capable of "managing" their empathic accuracy, dialing it up or down depending on the demands of the situation or their own motivations (e.g., Smith, Hall, Hodges, & Ickes, 2011; Ickes & Simpson, 2001). Our current study extends the research on motivated accuracy/inaccuracy by exploring the question of whether intimate partners who are highly motivated to induce change in their partner during conflicts will be more empathically accurate than partners who are less motivated to do so.

The partner who wants to change the status quo of the relationship, or who wants to induce change in their partner's thoughts or behavior (i.e., the conflict initiator, also called the agent of change; e.g., Christensen & Pasch, 1993) often relies on *demanding communication*, expressed as the tendency to demand change in a somewhat critical and blaming manner, for example, by nagging, criticizing or "pressing" the other. Although this strategy is regarded as destructive when it becomes highly polarized or rigid—in the long term leading to some unwanted relational outcomes—it is frequently observed during conflict interactions, even in

satisfied couples (Eldridge, Sevier, Jones, Atkins, & Christensen, 2007). Because the conflict initiator's demanding behavior is driven by a strong motive to confront the source of the problem/disagreement and to resolve it by changing the partner, the relationship, the situation, or any combination of these elements, it seems likely that this motive might lead first to an attempt to accurately infer the partner's current thoughts and feelings about issue(s) at the heart of the conflict. As much as anything else, therefore, what is being "demanded" of the partner in this situation is insight into his or her thoughts and feelings[1].

Because greater motivation to be accurate typically leads to greater empathic accuracy (Ickes, 2011), partners who have more demanding interaction styles might therefore be more likely to "read" their partner's minds in ways that enable them to exert more influence on their partner and thereby achieve a better outcome for the perceiver. Even in satisfying intimate relationships, the partners who are more motivated to resolve a conflict by effecting desired change should find this same strategy useful. Consistent with this reasoning, we predicted that the partners' level of demanding communication during a conflict discussion, consisting of "blame" and "pressure for change," should be positively associated with their level of empathic accuracy. We also explored whether this association was moderated by whether or not the perceiver was also the person who initiated the conflict.

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[1] Although the primary motives for engaging in demanding behavior in conflict situations are to improve one's own outcomes and relative power in the relationship, such behavior might also enhance empathic accuracy because of its potential to further these goals.

Method

Participants

The recruitment of participants was twofold. First, a general call was placed in magazines and newspapers recruiting couples who were willing to participate in a research project on close relationships. Second, the research assistants approached couples in public places such as shopping areas. The couples who expressed an interest in being included in the study were informed about the project and were evaluated for their eligibility to participate. The inclusion criteria stipulated that the participants had to have been in a heterosexual relationship for at least one year and either married or cohabiting for at least six months. Couples participated voluntarily and could withdraw from the investigation at any time. The sample consisted of 52 partners ($M_{\text{age men}}$ = 36.96 years, SD = 13.24; $M_{\text{age women}}$ = 35.23 years, SD = 12.49) who represented 26 cohabitating/married heterosexual couples (relationship duration: M = 10.64 years, SD = 11.58). Each couple completed a set of questionnaires and then participated in a videotaped conflict interaction task. Before this interaction, the randomly-designated conflict initiator was asked to select a problem or issue of which the source was either the partner or the relationship. The couple was then asked to discuss the problem (and was allowed up to a maximum time limit of 30 minutes for this discussion).

Measures

Immediately after the conflict interaction, both partners completed a video-review task in which they (a) wrote down their own thoughts/feelings and (b) made inferences about their partner's thoughts/feelings, at predetermined pauses during the videotaped interaction (see Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, De Clercq, & Peene, 2005). Following the recommendations of Ickes, Stinson, Bissonette and Garcia (1990), five independent raters coded the degree of similarity between the content of the actual reported thoughts/feelings and the perceiver's inferences, resulting in an overall empathic accuracy score (which is expressed as a percent-

correct score). The average scores for the men and the women were 12% ($SD = 7$) and 15% ($SD = 12$), respectively, and the empathic accuracy measure showed a high interrater reliability in both cases ($ICC_{Men} = .83$; $ICC_{Women} = .88$).

The behaviors observed in this study were rated and analyzed using the Conflict Interaction Rating System (CIRS; Heavey, Gill, & Christensen; 1998). These ratings resulted in scores on a 9-point Likert scale for two dimensions of demanding communication (see appendix 1), *blame* ($M_{men} = 2.88$, $SD = 1.56$; $M_{women} = 3.76$, $SD = 1.77$) and *pressure for change* ($M_{men} = 3.38$, $SD = 1.97$; $M_{women} = 4.23$, $SD = 2.21$). Again, a high interrater reliability was achieved for both blame ($ICC_{Men} = .96$; $ICC_{Women} = .96$) and pressure for change ($ICC_{Men} = .97$; $ICC_{Women} = .97$).

Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976). The internal consistency in this sample was high for the DAS (Cronbach's $\alpha_{Men} = .89$; $\alpha_{Women} = .87$). The men and women reported average relationship satisfaction scores of 115.31 ($SD = 13.05$) and 117.50 ($SD = 14.27$), respectively. DAS norms (Spanier, 1976) indicate an average satisfaction score of 114/115 for a married sample, thereby suggesting that our sample is comparable to an average group of married couples in terms of relationship satisfaction.

Results

Our predictions were tested by means of a Linear Mixed-Effects Model as implemented in the R-package lme-4 (http://lme4.r-forge.r-project.org/), with the perceiver's empathic accuracy score as the dependent variable. The partners' relationship satisfaction, their respective gender, each partner's status as the conflict initiator (yes vs. no), and his/her amount of blame and pressure for change behavior displayed during the videotaped conflict interaction were entered as fixed factors. Besides these "main effect" terms, two two-way interactions (conflict initiator X blame behavior and conflict initiator X pressure for change

behavior) were defined and included in the model. As a random factor, a dummy variable was created that indicated membership in a particular dyad. Prior to model fitting, all continuous variables were standardized. Effect coding was used for categorical variables. Table 1 reports the parameter estimates, standard deviations, and confidence intervals of the resulting analyses.

After controlling for a significant effect of relationship satisfaction ($\chi^2(1) = 3.96$, $p = .05$), the results of this analysis revealed a significant and positive main effect of the perceiver's blame behavior on the perceiver's empathic accuracy ($\chi^2(1) = 12.70$, $p < .01$). Also, the two-way interaction of conflict initiator x perceiver's pressure for change was significant ($\chi^2(1) = 4.14$, $p < .05$). A closer inspection of the data indicated that partners who reported more relationship satisfaction were more empathically accurate during the conflict interaction. Also, partners who displayed more blame behavior during the videotaped conflict interactions showed more empathic accuracy, independent of whether they initiated the conflict discussion or not.

The conflict initiator x perceiver's pressure for change interaction took the following form. When the perceiver participant was in the conflict initiating role, the perceiver's higher levels of pressure for change were associated with lower levels of empathic accuracy. Although this finding was not predicted, it is intriguing in its implication that the task of applying a high level of pressure to the interaction partner might impair the perceiver's ability to achieve a high level of empathic accuracy. However, this observed negative relation between perceiver's pressure for change and empathic accuracy was reversed (i.e., was positive) when the perceiver was not the conflict initiator, suggesting that perceivers who react to the initiator's demand for change with strong counter-pressure for the *initiator* to change instead, may do so out of a clearer and more accurate understanding of why the initiator is pushing so hard for the change and why the initiator's request is inappropriate.

Table 1

Results of the Linear Mixed-Effects Model Predicting Empathic Accuracy From Gender, Conflict Initiator, Blame and Pressure for Change and Controlled For Relationship Satisfaction.

Predictor	β	SD	95% CI
Gender			
Man	0.04	0.12	[-0.20 – 0.28]
Woman	0[a]	0[a]	
Conflict Initiator			
No	-0.19	0.12	[-0.42 – 0.04]
Yes	0[a]	0[a]	
Relationship Satisfaction	0.30*	0.15	[0.00 – 0.60]
Blame	0.47**	0.13	[0.21 – 0.73]
Pressure for Change	0.07	0.13	[-0.19 – 0.33]
Conflict Initiator x Blame	-0.11	0.13	[-0.36 – 0.14]
Conflict Initiator x Pressure for Change	0.26*	0.13	[0.01 – 0.51]

Note. [a] This parameter is set to zero because it is redundant. CI = confidence interval.
*$p < .05$, ** $p < 0.001$.

Discussion

The results of this study were more complicated than we had predicted, but they revealed some intriguing findings that in retrospect make sense. The analysis included partners' relationship quality scores because this variable showed to be positively associated with empathic accuracy. The main effect of blame behavior suggests that partners who showed more blame behavior during the conflict interaction also were more empathic accurate, but this was regardless of them initiating the conflict or not. When a perceiver initiates a conflict discussion and puts a lot of pressure on the partner to change his or her behavior, this "heavy-handed" and confrontational perceiver appears to be less accurate in "reading" the partner's thoughts and feelings, presumably because of the extra effort and attention that pressuring the partner requires. Interestingly, however, when the perceiver is the person who did *not* initiate the conflict discussion, but who reacts to the partner's request for change by putting more pressure on the initiator to change instead, he or she was found to make more accurate inferences about the initiator's thoughts and feelings. So, the pressure for change behavior of this assertive and non-intimidated perceiver seems to be associated with higher empathic accuracy scores.

This pattern of results illustrates the potential risk of starting a conflict in which the initiator starts pressuring the partner too much. As the conflict initiator applies more pressure to the partner, the initiator may find it more difficult to devote attention to inferring the target's thoughts and feelings, and his or her empathic accuracy might therefore decline. Interestingly, the conflict initiator's high-pressure approach might not only undermine his or her own empathic accuracy; it also has the potential to elicit a strong counter-response (i.e., strong counter-pressure) from a partner who "reads" the conflict initiator's feelings and motives accurately and thinks that the conflict initiator should be pressured to change instead. The irony, then, is that a conflict initiator who applies undue pressure to an interaction partner

often winds up at an empathic disadvantage. According to our results, the more pressure the initiator applies to the partner, the more impaired the initiator's empathic accuracy is likely to be. And, ironically, our results further suggested that the more the initiator pressures the partner for change, the more accurately the partner tends to understand the thoughts, feelings, and motives that are driving the initiator's high-pressure offensive, and the more counter-influence the partner tends to exert on the initiator. In other words, conflict initiators who try to impose their will on others tend to be less sensitive to their interaction partners' thoughts and feelings, whereas partners who accurately perceive the initiator's actual thoughts and feelings seems to be more likely to resist their influence and may apply a strong counter-influence instead of succumbing to the initiator's pressure.

The dynamics of this process should have important implications not only for marital conflict discussions but for negotiation discussions more generally (e.g. Druckman, 1977; Finnegan & Hackley, 2008; Hueffmeier & Hertel, 2012; Lewicki, Weiss, & Lewin, 1992). When partners (or parties) negotiate with each other to maximize their respective outcomes, they have to be careful to stop short of applying too much pressure to induce the other partner (or party) to change. Doing so not only may reduce one's own ability to accurately "read" the thoughts and feelings of the other partner (or party), but may also motivate a self-assertive counter-response in the other party that is driven by a more accurate assessment of the initiator's actual thoughts, feelings, and motives.

These are fascinating effects, and although they are more complex than we initially expected, they have the potential to open up a new and promising line of research. We strongly encourage additional research on this topic, in the context of both marital conflict and negotiation discussions.

Future research should also address the major limitations of the present study. Specifically, because our sample was small and included relatively few dissatisfied couples,

future research should use samples that are larger and more diverse in terms of relationship satisfaction. Moreover, in studies using larger samples, researchers might be more likely to find interaction effects involving the perceiver's gender, because during the preliminary analyzes, the present sample did not have enough statistical power to detect relatively subtle effects of this type. Another limitation of the present study is that the variable durations of the couples' conflict interactions resulted in empathic accuracy scores based on a different numbers of thought/feeling inferences, a problem that the use of a "percent correct" empathic accuracy measure does not completely correct. Finally, the usual recommended caution should be exercised in inferring causality from our results, because the hypothesized temporal ordering of the variables could not be established conclusively in this cross-sectional design. Future research needs to resolve this causality issue as well.

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Appendix 1

Examples of Demanding Behavior

Blame. The husband (who had been designated as the conflict initiator) thinks that his wife takes too much time to complete her household tasks during the day and that this is due to the fact that she is sleeping too much. The husband starts the discussion with a remark on his wife's sleeping habits. This example is an excerpt that has been translated from the Dutch conversation.

H: "You don't have to react like that, [yet] **you always react this way**."
W: "My reaction is normal."
H: "No, your reaction isn't normal—**you're pissed off**"
W: "But you started it; your reaction was a sarcastic one. You said "You were lucky you were already awake."
H: "I just said that. **You always get immediately pissed off when I say something. You always argue.** It is always a fight. I'm sick of all this."

Pressure for Change. The wife (designated as the conflict initiator of the discussion) starts a conversation about the car driving behavior of her husband. She is upset because they got lost when driving to the building for their research appointment. He responds with frustration because in his opinion she always distracts him by starting a conversation and asking him questions while he is driving. The wife starts the conflict discussion with a question about his driving behavior (translated from the Dutch conversation).

W: "You know you had to drive straight ahead and yet you turned left. Why?"
H: "We aren't talking about this again, are we?"
W: "But you always get lost…"
H: "**You shouldn't distract me**."
W: "Not distract you? **You shouldn't get distracted then…**"
H: "You start this conversation, and yet you already know what you should do… **You should be quiet in the car.** Just let me, just let me drive…"
W: "But I didn't start it! You started the conversation this time! You started by asking me what we were going to do this afternoon—you started to chat!"
M: "Yes, **but you cannot do that; hey, you know you shouldn't distract me.**"
W: "Ah, I shouldn't respond then?"
H: "Indeed."